

GAMING DEVICE HAVING SYMBOL STACKS

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates in general to gaming devices, and more particularly to gaming devices that randomly displays symbol stacks.

[0003] Gaming device manufacturers produce many different types of slot machines employing a plurality of reels which each have a plurality of symbols. When the player places a wager which causes the reels to spin, the slot machine produces a random generation of a combination of the symbols on the reels. If the generated combination or a portion of the combination matches one of a number of predetermined award producing or winning combinations, the player receives an award. The award is commonly one or more credits that the player can play or redeem for money.

[0004] To increase player enjoyment and excitement, and to increase the popularity of the gaming machines, gaming device manufacturers constantly strive to provide players with new features that add to the excitement and enjoyment generated by the gaming device. One element of gaming devices that receives considerable attention from the game designer is the displayed symbols. The generated symbols are the player's primary focus during the game because the symbols determine the player's outcome.

[0005] The symbols are often chosen to reflect the theme of the gaming device. The symbols typically have indicia that is interesting. To date, however, gaming devices have presented the symbols to the player via established techniques. For example, the symbols are on and thus move with the reels until the reels come to rest and display a portion of the reel strip to the player, which is typically three symbols from each reel strip. While players have become accustomed to these techniques, it is believed that adding variety to the standard techniques of symbol generation and display in gaming devices is desirable. Accordingly, a need exists for a different and exciting way to provide and present symbols to a player.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] The present invention provides a gaming device and specifically a slot machine which includes a set of symbols. The gaming device randomly displays a portion of the symbols which are on a plurality of reel strips on a display device when the player plays a game of the gaming device. One or more positions on one or more of the reel strips of the present invention includes a stack of symbols or symbol stack. When the gaming device spins the reel strips and randomly displays a portion of the reel strips to the player, the portion can but does not have to display one or more symbol stacks.

[0007] The symbol stack includes an initially displayed symbol and at least one initially hidden symbol. In one embodiment, the hidden symbols are stacked or positioned beneath the initially displayed symbol. In another embodiment of the present invention, one of the initially hidden symbols visually replaces the initially displayed symbol so that a different set of visible symbols appears on the display device.

[0008] Each symbol stack includes a single initially hidden symbol or a plurality of initially hidden symbols. The initially hidden symbols are sequentially revealed after the gaming device removes or discontinues the display of a previously displayed symbol. If the symbol stack includes a plurality of initially hidden symbols, a second initially hidden symbol visually replaces the displayed first initially hidden symbol, and so on. Each removal creates a new set of symbols. Any one or all of the different sets may be evaluated to determine if a winning combination exists and if a payout is to be provided to the player.

[0009] In one embodiment, the symbol stack includes at least one hidden symbol, which is predetermined and associated with the initially displayed symbol. In this embodiment, the actual symbols that are hidden or stacked behind the initially displayed symbol are fixed and do not change from reel spin to reel spin. These hidden symbols are displayed in the fixed predetermined order. In another embodiment, the number or amount of hidden symbols stacked behind the initially displayed symbol are fixed but randomly chosen at the time of the removal of the initially displayed symbol. In another alternative embodiment, the hidden symbols can be randomly selected by the processor of the gaming device.

[0010] In one embodiment, the gaming device employs a slot game. The slot game includes a plurality of slot machine reels displayed on the display device, wherein each reel includes a plurality of standard slot machine symbols. One or more of the reels include one or more symbol stacks.

[0011] The symbol stacks in one embodiment appear randomly on the display device. Once a symbol stack appears, the removal of the displayed symbols may be implemented in various ways. In one embodiment, an initial triggering event causes removal of the displayed symbols or top-most symbol of the stack and the sequential appearance of one or more of the initially hidden symbols of the symbol stack. In another embodiment, a separate triggering event is required for each removal.

[0012] In one embodiment, the triggering event is simply the appearance of the symbol stack, for example, along an active or wagered upon slot machine payline. Here, the initially displayed symbol is automatically removed upon the random appearance of the symbol stack. Before each removal, the processor of the gaming device in one embodiment, makes a payout evaluation. In another embodiment, the processor of the gaming device makes a payout evaluation only upon certain removals.

[0013] Still further, a separate triggering event may be required. The separate triggering event can be a random event, for example, a symbol or combination of symbols appearing on the reels of a slot machine. The separate triggering event alternatively includes a player input. For example, the gaming device can employ a keep or trade type of game that lets the player determine whether to keep the current symbol or trade the current symbol for the next